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IN QUEST OF A NATIONAL HISTORICAL
RECORDS PROGRAM

Peter T. Harstad

Three days before Christmas, 1974, President Gerald R. Ford signed Public Law 93-536 which, in less than two hundred words, gave rise to a national historical records program. The law did so by redesignating the National Historical Publications Commission (NHPC) as the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC); increasing the membership of the commission by four; and doubling the commission's authorization of appropriations (not its actual appropriation) from two to four million dollars. Some members of the historical and archival professions were jubilant. A few, who had worked hard for something on a much grander scale, saw the new law as a very modest and perhaps inauspicious beginning for a truly national historical records program. Perhaps most archivists and historians adopted at least a mildly optimistic "wait-and-see" attitude.

Now, five years later, it is time to evaluate how effectively the records program, created under PL 93-536 and through NHPRC policy, has functioned. How many of us feel that the records program has received adequate funding? How many of us would give

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the commission and its staff a grade of B+ or above for what has been accomplished with the funds allocated to the records program to date? Finally, how many of us feel that the program, as presently constituted, is so close to perfection that we need not consider the six pages of issues and questions we received by mail in advance of this meeting?

It is well to recognize at the outset of our conference that some of the issues we face in the context of the records program are as old as the Union itself. What is a proper balance between national direction and self-determination within the states? In what ways, and through what channels, should a national historical records program be responsible to the people? In a nation of diversity, how should the federal beneficence for records be allocated? Are policies suitable for a modestly funded program transferable to a multimillion-dollar operation? These and many related issues have twists and nuances, some of which may be attributed to the very nature of historical records and where they are found in this country. Politicians, members of the NHPC staff, professional archivists, and historians (including employees of the National Archives and Records Service) recognized this in the mid-1970s, when they did not find ready-made policies for conducting a records program. However, some then saw, and may still see, merit in the pattern of the national historic preservation program.

To understand the quest for a national historical records program which led to the 1974 law, we must turn to those cultural politicians who saw the bicentennial celebration of the nation's independence as prime time for upgrading historical and archival programs. "It is ironic, if not embarrassing, that those who led the Revolution cared more for historical records than we do today," asserted Edward C. Papenfuse.¹ Such people could point out that even before drafting of the Declaration of Independence Thomas Jefferson had exchanged ideas with Ebenezer Hazard, an able

pioneer in the preservation and publication of historical records. They could quote the cover letter Jefferson sent to Hazard after the Revolution along with the two volumes of "curious monuments of the infancy of our country" he had previously borrowed:

Time and accident are committing daily havoc on the originals deposited in our public office. The late war has done the work of the centuries in this business. The lost cannot be recovered; but let us save what remains; not by vaults and locks which fence them from the public eye and use . . . but by such a multiplication of copies, as shall place them beyond the reach of accident.²

Moving forward in American history, promoters of a national historical records program could enlist the support of that able Frenchman who visited the United States in the 1830s. Alexis de Tocqueville lamented that in this country "nothing is written, or if it is, the slightest gust of wind carries it off, like . . . leaves to vanish without recall." He predicted that in fifty years "it will be harder to collect authentic documents about the details of social life in modern America than about French medieval administration." In a section on "administrative instability," Tocqueville elaborated: "Nobody bothers about what was done before his time. No method is adopted; no archives are formed; no documents are brought together, even when it would be easy to do so." He confessed, "Among my papers I have original documents given to me by public officials to answer some of my questions." With such carelessness about records, Tocqueville concluded, "It is very difficult for American administrators to learn anything from each other."³

As Tocqueville and others observed, historical and archival institutions in the United States lagged far behind those of western Europe. Yet, by the middle of the nineteenth century, state historical societies had

emerged under favorable auspices in some American states. Late in the century, a few federal agencies were following the lead of the Library of Congress in taking an interest in historical records. Early in the twentieth century, several states had archival programs worthy of the name. However, adequate preservation of federal records and regularized access to them were hardly possible until after passage of the National Archives Act of 1935.

Two provisions of this act mandated activities beyond the care of official government records and beckoned in the direction of a national historical records program, as did the Historical Records Survey of the late 1930s. One provision of the National Archives Act empowered the new agency to "acquire and preserve motion pictures and sound records 'pertaining to and illustrative of historical activities in the United States.'" Another provision created the National Historical Publications Commission (NHPC) as a separate organization with the Archivist of the United States as its chairman, and with a mandate to "make plans, estimates, and recommendations for such historical works and collections of sources as seem appropriate for publication and/or recording at the public expense."⁴ Following its reorganization in 1950, the NHPC took an increasingly active role in the production of letterpress and microform editions of publicly and privately generated historical sources.

All of this, and much more, is background to the deliberate steps taken by the cultural politicians on the eve of the nation's bicentennial celebration. On May 16, 1972, President Alexander Wall of the American Association for State and Local History, President T. Harry Williams of the Organization of American Historians, President George C. Haskins of the American Society for Legal History, and President Charles E. Lee of the Society of American Archivists (who also served as leader and chairman of this elite group) presented a carefully prepared proposal for a national

historical records program to the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission (ARBC) meeting in Boston. The plan called for the creation of a substantially funded program of grants-in-aid "to assist states, communities, qualified groups, and institutions in locating, preserving, and making accessible the nation's public and private historic records."

Lee and his peers envisioned the program as "a companion to the Historic Sites Act of 1966, which seeks to preserve historically important sites and structures for posterity." They proposed that the Archivist of the United States serve as chairman of a National Historical Records Commission (NHRC) which would be parallel to, but separate from, the NHPC. With the concurrence of the NHRC, a staff would establish national guidelines "based upon a comprehensive survey of regional and state needs," maintain a national register of archives and manuscript collections, and attend to the administration of grants. The plan called for advisory boards in each of the states consisting (as would the parent NHRC) of top professionals as well as distinguished citizens. In addition to working through the state advisory boards, the NHRC would be authorized to work directly with national and regional groups. For, as Charles Lee put it, "Fifty state plans sewn together don't make a national plan."⁵

The ARBC unanimously approved the proposal for a National Historical Records Commission and forwarded it, along with a favorable resolution, to President Richard M. Nixon on June 16, 1972. However, Nixon soon had other things on his mind; on June 17 the arrests at Watergate were made. Lee, Robert Williams of Florida, the late Richard Hale, Jr., of Massachusetts, and Sam Silsby of Maine had no way of knowing how serious the Watergate matter was as they worked to get a bill introduced in Congress. They succeeded on March 19, 1973, when Senator Edward W. Brooke of Massachusetts introduced S 1293.⁶ The same archivists

also contacted members of the House. Congressman Frank Horton of New York took a particular interest in the cause and worked with Representative Jack Brooks of Texas on a House version of the National Historical Records Commission bill. However, these two men, key members of the Government Activities Subcommittee of the Committee on Government Operations but of opposite political parties, could not agree upon anything resembling a strong NHRC bill.

Archivist Hale of Massachusetts explained his perception of how things stood on March 11, 1974, in a letter to Senator Brooke of his own state. He briefed the senator on a February 25 meeting for which "Mr. Lee called in three State Archivists [Silsby, Williams, and Hale] . . . and the Director of the National Historical Publications Commission." According to Hale, the director was called in because

it was felt that OMB [Office of Management and Budget] did not want to make a separate new Commission. Therefore, the route taken was to expand the National Historical Publications Commission. To this suggestion, the Commission had agreed and it was the job of the meeting to reach agreement on details.

Charles Lee contends that a clerk of the Senate Judiciary Committee first came up with the idea of combining a national records program with the existing NHPC. In a speech of April 13, 1975, James B. Rhoads attributed the idea to Representative Jack Brooks. All of the accounts agree that the suggestion did not come from NHPC, NARS staff, or from the archival or historical communities.⁷

Hale explained to his senator an agreement concerning the composition of the commission and authorizing a total expenditure of \$12 million, of which \$2 million would go to publications. "Otherwise the new bill is a marriage of your bill and the present

Historic Publications Commission Act." Hale elaborated what he saw as a

continuum with preservation at one end, and letter press publication at the other. . . . One may make sure that a document is protected from decay by deacidifying or perhaps also laminating. One may find that a security microfilm is a more economical and practical way of preserving for use the information in a document. One may find that there is enough scholarly demand for the document to justify microfilm publication. Last of all, it may prove economical in dollars and cents to edit and print in letter-press and recoup the cost from sales. All these are forms of preservation.

Hale closed with the thought that some years earlier he had been involved with "securing federal matching funds for the preservation of historical buildings, and was impressed by the way a small amount of seed money caused local people to open their purses wide."

Jack Brooks now promoted the idea that NHPC already had the authority, but not the means, to carry on a national historical records program. The NHPC concurred, as did the Archivist of the United States, James B. Rhoads. According to Brooks, minimal adjustments were needed in the NHPC law, plus additional money for records. Nothing more. When Charles Lee testified before Brooks's Government Activities Subcommittee of the Committee on Government Operations on July 16, 1974, he favored the bill, but took the position that it was no more than a beginning: "In all honesty, we do not even know what the actual situation is with regard to the records of our nation's past. We do know that it comes close to being a national disaster."

With historian Joe B. Frantz of the University of Texas leaning on Brooks, and strong support in the

Senate from Samuel J. Ervin of North Carolina, the unpretentious piece of legislation passed the House on "consent Monday," December 3, 1974. It cleared the Senate on December 12, and President Ford signed it on December 22. The law put an R in NHPC, and added four members to the commission, two each from SAA and AASLH. Charles Lee had envisioned at least an Oldsmobile, but he had gotten a Ford--a Pinto. PL 93-536 provided for an authorized doubling of the NHPC budget from two million to four million, but the increase was by no means insured, and did not come until the present budgeting cycle.⁸

Nevertheless, by late 1974, people with keen noses could "smell the meat cookin"--or thought they could. The director of NHPC requested a promotion from a GS-15 to 16. He wrote that since he had "both run a state archival agency and been intimately involved with the National Register program, which was in many ways used as a model by those who have been pressing for the creation of the Records program, I am perhaps uniquely qualified to head the newly created entity." Archives people from around the country sent letters of inquiry to the Archivist of the United States. Some wanted jobs. Others wanted to know if there would be a new historical records survey. Still others wanted to know about grants.⁹

The NHPRC acted promptly. On January 10, 1975, Archivist Rhoads entered into a contract with Herbert E. Angel, retired deputy archivist of the United States. Angel was to confer with "selected State officers and representatives of historical societies, libraries, and similar organizations to develop criteria for a plan of action for a national program for the preservation and accessibility of the nation's documentary resources" to be followed by NHPRC. He was to present the plan at the February 20 meeting of the commission. After "review and evaluation" by the commission, Angel was to prepare "policies and priorities for such a national program, and develop

regulations for publication and soliciting, reviewing, processing, and recommending grants." The second phase of Angel's work was to be completed by April 30, 1975.¹⁰

Angel provided the administrative track the records program is running on today, and he helped to establish a timetable for objectives. As he went about work, he was bombarded with communications about things now familiar to us. Richard Erney of Wisconsin wrote on March 13, 1975, "Being one who regards coordinators as those who work very hard to see that everything collapses at once, I am not partial to use of the title in this program."¹¹ E. Berkeley Tompkins, executive director of NHPRC, who had been thinking in terms of at least ten million dollars for the records program, took a firm stand against involvement with records until adequate funding was assured. He wrote to Angel, April 9, 1975, "If the present elephant--after a lengthy period of gestation, and elaborate and well-publicized labor pains--gives birth to a mouse, a lot of people are going to look foolish."¹² No new money came forth during 1975, and NHPRC pulled \$100,000 from other sources to initiate the records program.

Things moved rapidly at NHPRC during the spring and summer of 1975. Frank G. Burke replaced Tompkins as executive director of NHPRC, and he in turn hired Larry J. Hackman to head up the records program. On August 25, Hackman sent ten solid pages of questions to Burke about the records program, to which he attached this note, "You can probably tell that I am anxious to get at the job, and that I hope to hit the ground running." One of Hackman's questions was, "Is the Commission's decision to give \$3,000 to each state which names an advisory board definite or not?" Burke replied in the affirmative, adding:

Staff did not mention that figure in any correspondence with the states, reserving notice of

it until later when need for it can be established by the States. I now plan to ask the Comm. to reconsider and loosen up some of that money for other things.¹³

From this point one could document, point after point, how NHPRC reacted to the Angel report and to staff recommendations, and how the commissioners interacted with each other and society generally to produce the records program as we know it. The issue of granting money directly to state advisory boards is only one of many sensitive and important issues before us. Last April one state archivist told me that giving money to a state advisory board he knew well was "as sensible as giving a bicycle to a baboon."¹⁴

It is time to sum up. Who put the R in NHPRC? Herbert E. Angel recently wrote:

In establishing the paternity of the NHPRC records program, I would be highly suspicious of Charles E. Lee, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, James B. Rhoads, former Archivist of the United States, Richard A. Erney, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, and the late Richard W. Hale, Jr., Archivist of Massachusetts, but I am sure that there were many others who had gleams in their eyes during the period June 1973 to December 1974.

Angel not only disclaimed paternity, but also provided the alibi that he had retired from the archives in January, 1972, and was in Africa during much of 1974. He added, "You might say that I assisted the family and friends of the infant by recommending the course of action it should take, its timing, how it should be financed, and a manual for its guidance."¹⁵

Here we are, then, in June, 1980, with a growing, five-year-old program to evaluate and to help improve. NHPRC now receives double the appropriation it received

back in 1974--a sum still far below the amount envisioned by the cultural politicians of the early 1970s for the records program alone. Most of us know the details of the records program, because we have worked with it to accomplish practical objectives. We have also participated in, or read about, appraisals of the records program at NHPRC, AASLH, and SAA meetings last fall. More recently, we have had the opportunity to read F. Gerald Ham's provocative article, "NHPRC's Records Program and the Development of Statewide Archival Planning" in the winter, 1980, issue of the American Archivist.

As of last October, thirty-four states had submitted plans which are generally "provisional and short-term." Overall, these statements "reflect the checkered and uneven progress of archival development in the nation." One irony is that in the archivally advanced state of South Carolina, the records program is, in Charles Lee's words, "virtually moribund." In my archivally underdeveloped state of Iowa, the records program has raised expectations and brought hope.¹⁶

As we go about our work today and tomorrow, several things are decidedly in our favor. Many signals tell us that the NHPRC and its staff are receptive to change. Although NHPRC has provided the funds for this conference, we are on neutral grounds here with the National Association of State Archives and Records Administrators as host. Before we get into the whirl of things, I wish to assert that, despite all the fiscal and policy shortcomings we shall soon air, NHPRC still runs the best federal program I know of. Communications from the NHPRC records program staff have been regular, courteous, and clear.

In the foreword to the 1978 NHPRC Report to the President, then commission chairman James B. Rhoads wrote, "The Commission remains committed to presenting the historical record free from proscribed

interpretation, untainted by partisan biases, and open for study by scholars and laymen alike."¹⁷ That is a worthy objective to have before us as we continue the quest for a better national historical records program here in Atlanta.

NOTES

¹Edward C. Papenfuse, "Preserving the Nation's Heritage Through A National Historic Records Program," American Historical Association Newsletter 11 (February 1973): 19-23. Quotation on p. 19.

²Julian P. Boyd, ed., The Papers of Thomas Jefferson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950-), 19:287.

³J. P. Mayer, ed., Alexis de Tocqueville: Democracy in America, trans. George Lawrence (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1969), pp. 207-8.

⁴Donald R. McCoy, The National Archives, America's Ministry of Documents, 1934-1968 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), p. 10.

⁵Quotations from Papenfuse, "Preserving," pp. 22-23. Charles E. Lee has explained much more about the background in "President's Page: The Proposed National Historic Records Program," American Archivist 35 (July/October 1972): 368-77. The statement attributed to Lee, however, was made during a telephone conversation of June 2, 1980.

⁶Folder and three-page report marked "Chronology" in NHPRC files.

⁷The quotations in this and the following paragraphs are from a letter, March 11, 1974, Richard W. Hale, Jr., to Honorable Edward Brooke marked "Attn: Mr. Ralph Neas" in NHPRC files.

⁸See Hearing Before A Subcommittee of the Committee on Government Operations House of Representatives. Ninety-Third Congress, Second Session, on H.R. 15818 . . . (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1974), pp. 1-50. Lee quotation, p. 49. Lee elaborated on the roles of Ervin and Frantz in a telephone conversation of June 2, 1980.

⁹December 19, 1974, memo from E. Berkeley to James B. Rhoads, NHPRC files. Examples of inquiries are also found in the same source.

¹⁰The contract was in the form of a letter, January 10, 1975, from James B. Rhoads to Herbert E. Angel, NHPRC files. Angel further elaborated the arrangement in a letter, April 30, 1980, to the author.

¹¹Richard Erney to E. Berkeley Tompkins, March 13, 1975, NHPRC files.

¹²E. Berkeley Tompkins to Herbert E. Angel, April 9, 1975, NHPRC files.

¹³Larry J. Hackman to Frank G. Burke, August 25, 1975, and Burke's undated reply in NHPRC files. Burke prevailed.

¹⁴F. Gerald Ham, April 11, 1980.

¹⁵Herbert E. Angel to the author, April 30, 1980.

¹⁶Quotations from the Ham article cited in the text, p. 34, and from June 2, 1980, telephone conversation with Charles E. Lee. Evaluations of the NHPRC program are available in Records Program Report

No. 80-1, Attachments D and E in The Midwestern Archivist, 3. Stephen J. Gerkey, a student of Ham, has also prepared an unpublished study, "The State Historical Records Advisory Boards: An Assessment of the First Four Years." Members of the NHPRC have also spoken with much candor at professional meetings and have published their views in a variety of reports and publications. So have members of the NHPRC staff.

¹⁷Quotation, p. 1.